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WAFER BOX WITH RADially PIVOTING LATCH ELEMENTSBACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This application is a continuation-in-part of application serial no. 10/787,489 filed on February 25, 2004 which claims priority from provisional patent application serial no. 60/479,086 filed June 17, 2003.

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a containment device or wafer box for semiconductor wafers. More particularly, this containment device has latch elements which pivot radially through slots in a cylindrical wall. The latch elements include spacer elements on the inside surface to engage semiconductor wafers within the cylindrical wall when the latch elements are in their upright position, detent engaged with the lid element. When the latch elements are not detent engaged with the lid, the latch elements along with the spacer elements are free to pivot radially outwardly to provide free access to the semiconductor wafers.

Description of the Prior Art

The prior art contains a variety of designs for the containment and transport of semiconductor wafers. These designs must provide both electrostatic and mechanical protection for the wafers contained therein. Preferably, such containment devices should be easily adaptable to various automated apparatus which load or unload the semiconductor wafers. Such containment devices should have a simple design which is reliable and economical to mass produce.

Examples of some prior art are U.S. Patent No. 6,193,068 entitled "Containment Device for Retaining Semiconductor Wafers" issued on February 27, 2001 to Lewis et al.; U.S. Patent No. 6,286,684 entitled "Protective System for Integrated Circuit (IC) Wafers Retained Within Containers Designed for Storage and Shipment" issued on September 11,

2001 to Brooks et al.; U.S. Patent No. 6,003,674 entitled "Method and Apparatus for Packing Contaminant-Sensitive Articles and Resulting Package" issued on December 21, 1999 to Brooks; and U.S. Patent No. 5,724,748 entitled "Apparatus for Packaging Contaminant-Sensitive Articles and Resulting Package" issued on March 10, 1998 to Brooks et al.

OBJECTS AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In order to attain the above and other objects, the semiconductor wafer containment device is provided with at least one cylindrical wall which forms a wafer containment space. The cylindrical wall includes slots through which latch elements pivot radially. The latch elements include spacer elements on the inward surface thereof. When the latch elements are detent engaged by the lid, the latch elements are in an upright position with the spacer elements extending into the wafer containment space formed within the cylindrical wall. The spacer elements are thereby urged against the semiconductor wafers in the wafer containment space. When the latch elements are free of engagement with the lid, the latch elements are free to pivot radially outwardly to release engagement with the semiconductor wafers to allow the semiconductor wafers to be removed by a manual or automated process for further processing. Typically, the spacer elements on the interior of the latch elements are formed of somewhat soft or spongy material so as to engage the semiconductor wafers without damaging the wafers.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Further objects and advantages will become apparent from the following description and from the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Figure 1 is a top plan view of the base of the semiconductor wafer containment device of the present invention.

Figure 2 is a side plan view of the base of the semiconductor wafer containment device of the present invention.

Figure 3 is a cross-sectional view along plane 3-3 of Figure 1.

Figure 4 is a bottom plan view of the base of the semiconductor wafer containment device of the present invention.

Figure 5 is a cross-sectional view along plane 5-5 of Figure 1.

Figure 6 is a cross-sectional view further detailing a portion of Figure 3.

Figure 7 is a top plan view of the lid of the semiconductor wafer containment device of the present invention.

Figure 8 is a cross-sectional view along plane 8-8 of Figure 7.

Figure 9 is a bottom plan view of the lid of Figure 7.

Figure 10 is a front plan view of the lid of Figure 7.

Figure 11 is a side plan view of the lid of Figure 7.

Figure 12 is a cross-sectional view along plane 12-12 of Figure 7.

Figure 13 is a cross-sectional view further detailing a portion of Figure 8.

Figure 14 is a perspective view of the pivoting latch element of the present invention, in an upright position so that the spacer element engages the semiconductor wafers.

Figure 15 is a perspective view of a portion of the underside of the base of the present invention, showing the pivoting mechanism of the pivoting latch element.

Figure 16 is a perspective view of the pivoting latch element of the present invention, in an outwardly pivoted position so that the spacer element is substantially free of engagement with the semiconductor wafers.

Figure 17 is a perspective view of the pivoting latch element of the present invention, with the spacer element removed thereby showing the pivoting mechanism.

Figure 18 is a perspective, partially cut-away, view of the lid of the semiconductor wafer containment device being brought into engagement with the base, whereby a ramp in the interior of the lid urges the pivoting latch element from an outwardly pivoted position toward the upright position as the lid is brought into engagement with the base.

Figure 19 is a perspective, partially cut-away, view of the lid of the semiconductor wafer containment device being brought further into engagement with the base, whereby the pivoting latch element is almost in its upright position, and approaching engagement with the slot in the lid.

Figure 20 is a perspective, partially cut-away, view of the lid of the semiconductor wafer containment device engaging the pivoting latch element so that the pivoting latch element is in its upright position and the spacer element is urged against the semiconductor wafers.

Figure 21 is a perspective, partially cut-away, view of the lid of the semiconductor wafer containment device free of engagement with pivoting latch element the base so that the pivoting latch element pivots outwardly thereby moving the spacer element away from the semiconductor wafers.

Figure 22 is a perspective view of the spacer element.

Figure 23 is a top perspective view of the base of an alternative embodiment of the semiconductor wafer containment device of the present invention, configured for use with four pivoting latch elements.

Figure 24 is a bottom perspective view of the base of an alternative embodiment of the semiconductor wafer containment device of the present invention, configured for use with four pivoting latch elements.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring now to the drawings in detail wherein like numerals refer to like elements throughout the several views, one sees that Figure 1 is a top plan view of the base 10 of the semiconductor wafer containment device or wafer box of the present invention. Base 10 includes a generally planar square floor 12 formed from sides 14, 16, 18, 20. Inner and outer concentric cylindrical walls 22, 24 rise from the planar floor 12. Male aligning elements 15, 19 are formed at central locations on sides 14, 18 outwardly from outer concentric cylindrical wall 24. Inner and outer concentric cylindrical walls 22, 24 include slots 26, 28 at opposed corners and aligned gaps forming openings 34, 36 which are opposed by 180° from each other. As shown in the fragmentary portion of Figure 3, the portion of inner concentric cylindrical wall 22 immediately adjacent to openings 34, 36 includes partial notch 38. A wafer containment space 40 is formed within inner concentric cylindrical wall 22. Wafer containment space 40 may be adapted to an eight inch diameter wafer, although a range of other sizes is certainly possible. Pivoting latch elements 44, 46 terminating in inverted ledges 48, 50 are journaled from diagonally opposite corners of floor 12 and pivot radially through slots 26, 28. Pivoting latch elements 44, 46 have extruded padded spacer elements 52, 53 on the interior surface thereof for the engagement of the semiconductor wafers 100 (see Figures 14, 16 and 18-21). As shown in Figures 16 and 17, pivoting latch elements 44, 46 include T-shaped grooves 54, 55 for receiving complementary T-shaped flanges 56, 58 on the exterior of extruded padded elements 52, 53 (see Fig. 22).

Extruded padded spacer elements 52, 53 need to be soft to cushion the semiconductor wafers 100 but firm enough to prevent movement as extruded padded spacer elements 52, 53 act like a spring gently pushing on the stack of semiconductor wafers 100. A typical material for the extruded padded spacer elements 52, 53 would be Kraton but one skilled in the art would recognize a range of equivalent materials after study of this disclosure.

Figure 4 shows the bottom plan view of base 10, including peripheral foot structure 60 which extends around the periphery of floor 12 in order to provide an offset between floor 12 and the surface (not shown) upon which base 10 is resting. Additionally, lattice work 62 is formed on the bottom of floor 12. Furthermore, Figure 4 shows the underside of the pivot axes 64, 66 of pivoting latch elements 44, 46.

Figures 23 and 24 show an alternative embodiment of base 10, with four slots 26, 27, 28, 29 with four pivot axes 64, 65, 66, 67 for receiving pivoting latch elements. Such a configuration is typically used for larger wafer sizes.

Figure 5 shows cross-sectional detail of the pivot axis 64 (which likewise applies to pivot axis 66) of pivoting latch element 44. Pivoting latch element 44 includes major arm 57 which is attached to minor arm 59. Minor arm 59 is seated within pocket 61 of base 10 and terminates at pivot axis 64. Major arm 57 is attached to minor arm 59 at an obtuse angle slightly greater than 90°. This obtuse angle, along with other dimensions, determines or limits the outward angle at which major arm 57 of pivoting latch element 44 can extend when minor arm 59 rests on the floor of pocket 61 thereby resulting in pivoting latch element 44 being in its outward position such as shown in Figures 14, 16, 18 and 21. The limiting of the outward angle or outward position is necessary to ensure that the structures of the lid 70, as described hereinafter, can capture the pivoting latch elements 44, 46 in the outward position and urge them into the upright detent position.

Figure 6 shows some detail of inner and outer concentric cylindrical walls 22, 24.

Figures 7-10 show the lid 70 of the semiconductor wafer containment device or wafer box of the present invention. Lid 70 includes top planar square surface 72 surrounded by peripheral upwardly extending ledge 74 and bounded by generally square outer skirt wall 82. Cylindrical wall 80 is formed inwardly of outer skirt wall 82. Slots 76, 78 are formed on opposite corners of top planar square surface 72. Slots are formed at each corner for a lid 70 adaptable to the embodiment of the base 10 shown in Figures 23 and 24. Ramps 77, 79 are formed between slots 76, 78 and outer skirt wall 82. In reaching the installed position of Figure 20, ramps 77, 79 capture the pivoting latch elements 44, 46 (see Figure 18) from a radially outward pivoted position (see Figure 21) and urge (see Figure 19) pivoting latch elements 44, 46 into an upright configuration so as to be received by slots 76, 78 to form a detent configuration (see Figure 20), thereby urging extruded padded spacer elements 52, 53 to impinge against semiconductor wafers 100 in wafer containment space 40.

Finger gripping elements 81, 83 are formed radially inward from slots 76, 78 to allow a user to manually urge pivoting latch elements 44, 46 inwardly to release from slots 76, 78 when the lid 70 is to be removed. Outer cylindrical wall 80 is formed on the lower side of top planar square surface 72. Outer cylindrical wall 80 further includes female aligning elements 85, 87 which are oriented 180° apart. In the installed position, outer cylindrical wall 80 is immediately outwardly concentrically adjacent from outer concentric cylindrical wall 24 and female aligning elements 85, 87 are engaged with male aligning elements 15, 19.

To use the wafer containment box of the present invention, the user would typically start with an empty base 10 (that is, with no semiconductor wafers 100 in wafer containment space 40), with pivoting latch elements 44, 46 in their outward positions. The user would then manually or with automated equipment, place semiconductor wafers 100 into wafer containment space 40 and place lid 70 over base 10 so as to capture pivoting latch elements 44, 46 and urge them to an upright detent position with extruded padded spacer elements 52,

53 impinging against semiconductor wafers 100 as shown in the sequence from Figures 18-20 and as described above. The wafer containment box is then typically transported. Lid 70 may be removed manually by squeezing the pivoting latch elements 44, 46 toward the finger gripping elements 81, 83 to release the pivoting latch elements 44, 46 from lid 70 thereby allowing the pivoting latch elements 44, 46 to pivot to an outward position (such as shown in Figure 21) thereby allowing easy access to the semiconductor wafers 100.

Thus the several aforementioned objects and advantages are most effectively attained. Although a single preferred embodiment of the invention has been disclosed and described in detail herein, it should be understood that this invention is in no sense limited thereby and its scope is to be determined by that of the appended claims.